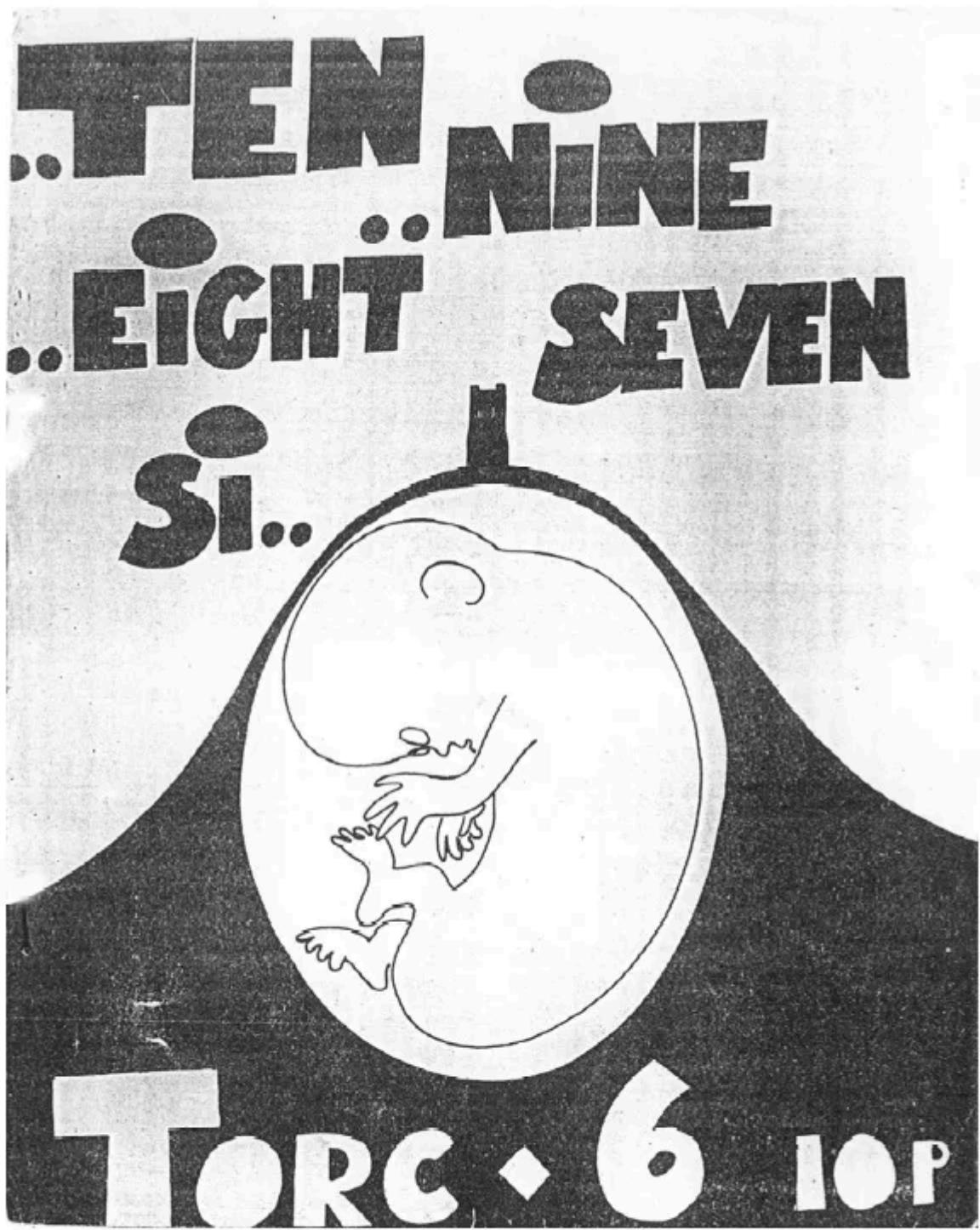


The Idiot Wizard



1973 began with the ludicrous situation in the UK Top 50 Singles Chart of David Bowie and Marc Bolan both being kept out of the number one spot by Little Jimmy Osmond singing “Long Haired Lover from Liverpool”. At number two David Bowie was singing “The Jean Genie” and at number three was “Solid Gold Easy Action by T. Rex.

New entries were “Blockbuster” by The Sweet, “Wishing Well” by Free, “If You Don’t Know Me by Now” by Harold Melvin and the Bluenotes, “Relay” by The Who, “Papa was a Rolling Stone” by The Temptations, “Big City” by Dandy Livingstone, “Paper Plane” by Status Quo, “Me and Mrs. Jones” by Billy Paul, “You are Awful” by Dick Emery, “On a Saturday Night” by Terry Dactyl and the Dinosaurs and, entering the chart at number 50, “Take Me Home, Country Roads” by Olivia Newton-John.

I’d saved some money from working in wintertime jobs and was attempting to set up a comic book dealership. As this plan crashed into the grim spectre of the real world and the concept of economics my funds dwindled and I ended up relying on Baggins to buy me breakfast most days. I made a few attempts at finding work around the Glastonbury area but the only thing I could get was a bit of labouring at a farm a few miles out of town.

That job ended disastrously as I walked across a field of long grass and little sticks called “withies” (flexible willow stems for basket weaving) carrying a bucket of creosote and walked straight into a concealed river. One minute I was carrying a bucket of creosote in one hand and a paint brush in the other, walking across a field. The next minute I was floundering about in deep water.

Funnily enough, falling into an invisible river and getting covered in creosote isn’t as much fun as it sounds. You find yourself surrounded by little sticks and the creosote sticks to you. It is not, however, the River Styx. So I survived.

Bad luck and dyspraxia have dogged my footsteps through life. I was always a natural fool and, despite talent and intelligence, I will always be so.

As a child I had spent an above average amount of time in the casualty department of the local hospital as a result of falling from trees, bicycles, roller skates, fences etc. I had developed an assortment of scar tissue on my legs and head particularly. I also didn’t yet realise that I was having occasional petit mal epileptic fits. These are difficult to recognise because your subjective experience of them is just a brief gap in the flow of time, followed by people looking at you as if you’ve done something funny.

Baggins was working on a local peat cutting site at Avalon Marshes in the Somerset Levels. The Levels are a boggy area and peat cutting had been a local industry for thousands of years. The peat was used for fuel, an alternative to coal. The Romans burned peat to boil sea water and thus extract the salt.

I was 19 and had just been through a disastrous relationship which tore my soul to shreds and wore it for a hat.

I was just about to get into an even more toxic, soul destroying and spirit eviscerating failure of a love affair with a woman younger than me but a hundred years older in experience.

I was also trying to write a book collaboration with Baggins and develop the basis of some sort of travelling vaudeville act. Things were complicated.

Baggins had his typewriter shipped from Essex and he set it up in the information centre in the back room of the macrobiotic café. We sat in there writing all day and giving information to any visitors who happened to poke their heads around the door to ask about the Tor and King Arthur and ley lines and whatnot.

We had some elves and King Arthur's favourite minstrel landing in a flying saucer and recruiting an eccentric cast of characters to battle against a false messiah mind control guru called "Moladridinor". The name has no great amount of meaning. The writing was juvenile and names were made up without much deeper thought. "Moladridinor" was supposed to sound a bit like "minotaur". The idea of a monstrous person from a labyrinth beneath the Tor. The formation of the word began with a "Mo" because it sounded like "Mordor" and "Morte D'Arthur" and "mortuary" and "moribund". Like "morbid" and "Mole Man" and "Morlock". The "dridinor" part at the end of the name was styled to sound like "dreadnaught". So, basically, Moladridinor was five dreadful guys named "Mo" - but all rolled into one. An evil reverse guru. A guru of Mammon and commerce. The story relied heavily on mythology and Saint John's dream of the final battle with The Beast 666. To me and Baggins it was a representation of our fears of being hypnotised and brainwashed by one of the many pseudo-religious cults which flourished in the 1970s and came to Glastonbury looking for recruits.

The hero was not the main protagonist. We wrote it from a comedic point of view like "Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein" with our own personalities projected into the book as the two clowns "Wiz" and "Jim".

Baggins and I had been sleeping in a shed behind the Macrobiotic café for a while. Over a period of several weeks Baggins and I slept in various locations. On the ley line which crossed Chalice Hill. In the groundsman's hut on Glastonbury football field. On Wirral Hill. On the Tor.

Unimpressed with hippies, beatniks, mods, rockers or skinheads I had invented a new fashion called "boksters" and Baggins had helped invent some of the bizarre and impossible elements of it.

The word "bokster" was derived from "bok" the Romani word for luck. "Kushti bok" means "Good luck" in Romani but the words "bok" and "bokushi" mean river, stream or creek in Choctaw North American. "Bok" also means "book" in Swedish and "hip" in Bohemian Czech. Bok was also the name of a fantasy author/illustrator from the old "Weird Tales" magazine and the name of a gargoyle demon in an episode of Doctor Who. The spelling of the word conveyed phonetically the comforting impression that things would "be okay" (B.O.K.).

Baggins declared that "the BOK was flowing" and this became the motto of the imaginary Bokster movement in our fantasy of a future 1990s. The boksters would wear top hats, hold

mad tea parties and help to defeat evil antichrists. Boksters would be both retro-Edwardian and futuristic Beatnik at the same time and combined with elements of Vaudeville and Cabaret. Tea drinking was our only vice. In some ways it was almost a presaging of Steampunk except that we didn't take ourselves quite so seriously as a 21st Century steampunk huckster would. And we had magic users in addition to science fiction and alternate history elements.

It was a pretend fashion. A deliberate pointed fake. A red herring. We didn't want too many people to join us. There was a danger of it becoming real. Ours was a world of both elves and flying saucers. We had certainly read Moorcock's "The Warlord of the Air" though. In our book we made it clear that the fictional characters of Wiz and Jim were now members of a bokster movement of "cosmic capering", living on luck and happenstance. It was all about the flowing of good luck or kushti bok.

The fantasy continued. We were time travelling beatniks from the 1950s. We were boksters from the future world of the 1990s where everyone had videophones and electronic devices which could carry a thousand books and could be fitted into a jacket pocket. We were Victorian gentlemen newly arrived from a parallel universe by airship. Tea drinking was an important ritual and the tea was known to boksters as "Boddhidharma's Eyelids". We were searching for a mysterious artifact known as "The Garnawoggle". A two-dimensional, one-sided artifact which was supposed to be able to switch a person onto a different time track where the probability was more in one's favour.

I wrote a Marc Bolan and T-Rex parody song called "Lizard Wizard":

"Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
he had assorted objects in his motor car.

Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
Lizard Wizard came from a distant star,
he had assorted objects in his motor car.

He had the Trans-Transylvanian Wire-Haired Mice,
He had the Trans-Transylvanian Wire-Haired Mice,
He had the Trans-Transylvanian Wire-Haired Mice,
He had the Garnawoggle on his dashboard."

The Glastonbury area had quite few residents who believed themselves to be magicians, wizards, witches or people of power. Perhaps some of them actually were. As the border between dream and reality, fiction, fact and memory became increasingly porous I was experimenting with astral projection and ley line sensing.

We were appearing in our own fantasy novel as two clown-fool characters. My clown persona had elements of Chaplin and Groucho Marx combined with older Court Jester styles. Baggins adopted a mixed persona of Harlequin and W. C. Fields.

As Wizzy Wiz the Wizard I wore a dignified evening dress tail coat and a bow tie, twirled a walking cane, danced and sang at almost any opportunity. The fictional persona and my real life began to blend and crossover. I could often be found wandering up the Tor to Saint Michael's Tower singing old skiffle songs or bits of Chuck Berry numbers or The Incredible String Band's "Juggler's Song". Proud of my eccentric costume I danced along Glastonbury High Street and skinheads mocked me, shouting "Waiter! Waiter! Oh waiter!" as I passed. I was able to sing "Burlington Bertie from Bow" while dancing and accompanying myself on the bicycle pump for percussion.

One time when I was capering madly on the Tor a friend gave me a printed card which turned out to be an invitation to the "Cosmic Caper's Club Reunion - Glastonbury Tor New Year's Eve 1991-1992". It fitted in perfectly with the story we were writing.

I preserved that card for the next 18 years and, when I was living in futuristic Taunton in futuristic Somerset in futuristic 1991 in real life, I actually went to the reunion on New Years Eve.

On Glastonbury Tor in 1991 I met a man called Terry and his family. Terry was the only other person who knew about the Cosmic Capers Club and we were delighted to find each other. It was a moment of joy and wonderment. We were the Cosmic Capers Club together again for the first time ever on Glastonbury Tor twenty years later!

I had been planning to sleep out under stars on the Tor that night but Terry and family invited me back to their house and gave me a guest room and breakfast.

During the conversation at breakfast "Terry's books" were mentioned in passing. I just thought they were referring to the books Terry had on his bookshelf.

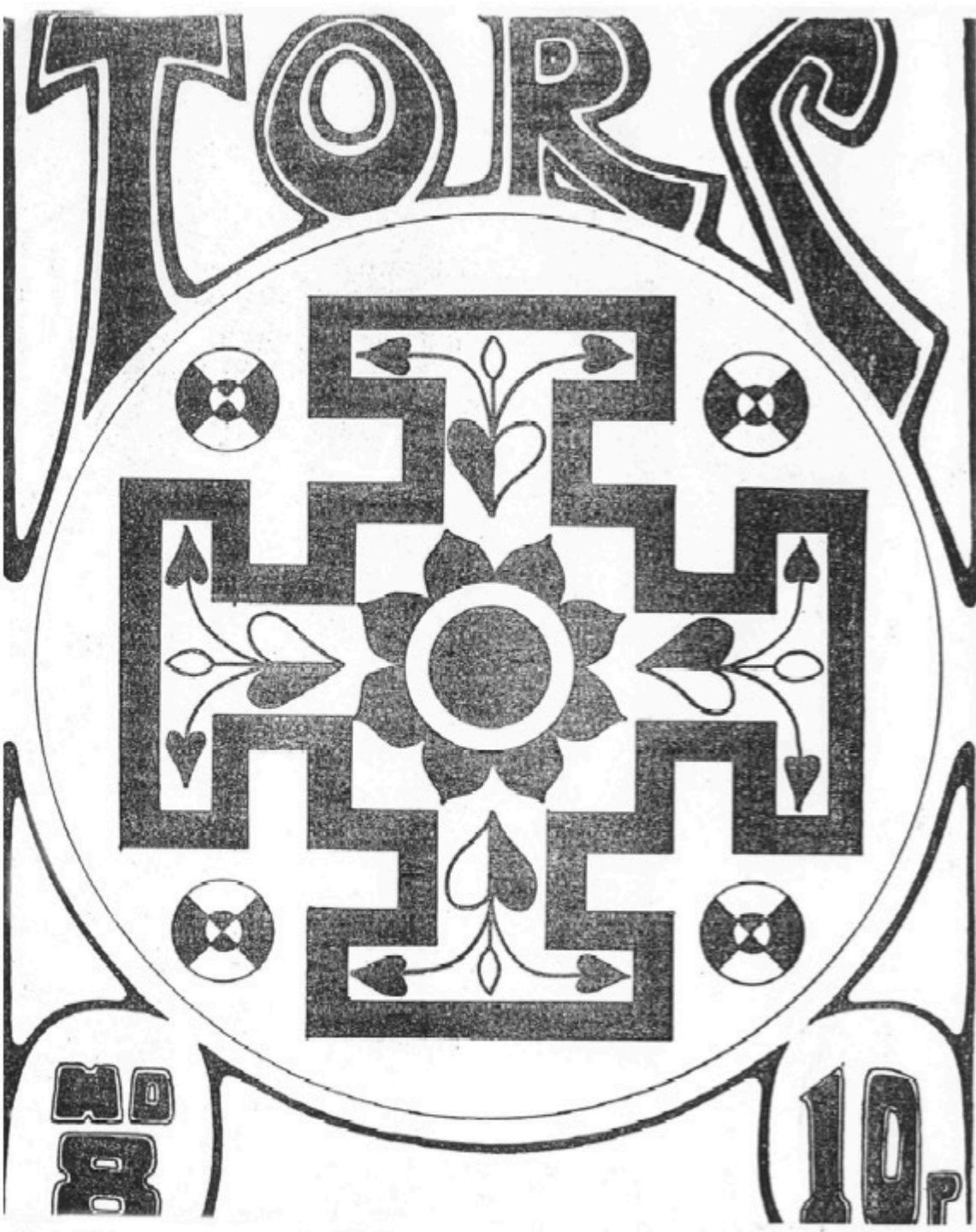
After breakfast I was given a lift back to Taunton. It would be some years before I would read "The Colour of Magic" and belatedly realise that the nice person called Terry whom I'd met on Glastonbury Tor that night was Terry Pratchett himself!

I felt both honoured and embarrassed at the same time. I had met a famous author whose books I'd hadn't even read yet and I had failed to recognise him! I'm such an idiot!

I had long conversations with him before sleeping and again at breakfast, joking about the "Cosmic Capers Club" and the art of "Capering the Bok" through alternate probability phases. I still didn't get who he was!

On the other hand this sort of thing is consistent with my usual idiocy. I often describe the thing I suffer from as "brain glitch" or sometimes "autistic brain glitch".

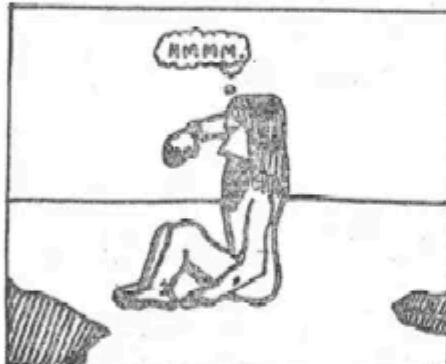
Anyway, back in that summer of not in any way futuristic 1973 a lot of writing got done. Patrick and Tina Benham published a local magazine "Torc" which contained articles and poetry about the significance of Glastonbury in the New Age. Baggins and I both contributed. Baggins wrote an article for one issue demonstrating a relationship between the Tarot and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. I responded in the next issue by finding a relationship between the Tarot and the I-Ching.



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I had a pack of Tarot Cards in a velvet pouch on my belt and an army surplus shoulder bag inscribed with signs and symbols of various different religions and philosophies. Inside the bag was my I-Ching and some paper and pencils for drawing.

By then I was going by the nickname "Wiz" full time and was becoming more and more involved in the fantasy role play of wizardry and time travel. The dividing line between reality and fiction was getting thinner. We spoke of "warping the fabric of reality" through magical surrealism. Words and dreams could warp the fabric.

Someone opened up Glastonbury Assembly Rooms as a squat and we all went to live there. This turned into one of those psychedelic commune situations which were a characteristic of early 70s alternative society and lead to Glastonbury Town Council eventually recognising the need for the Assembly Rooms as a music venue and arts centre.

Once the Assembly Rooms had achieved this new status in the community the squatters moved to a couple of houses a few miles outside town, up the road at Havyatt. Many nights were spent telling traveller's tales by candle light on bare floorboards and discussing mystic philosophy. People seemed to be of the consensus that all the gods, demons, fairy folk and supernatural were real and that it all came down to energy in the final analysis.

I was beginning to realise that I was asexual although I still had quasi-platonic romantic crushes on women and I genuinely believed myself to be in love with Sandy. The women at the squat kept giving me lots of hugs and kisses and telling me "Oh, little Wiz, you're so funny!" I didn't understand why I was being so favoured but I didn't mind. It was just that my brain didn't seem to be constructed the same way as other people's and I was trying to figure out why.

Sandy was keeping me going as a fool-boyfriend but was making no secret of the fact that there were others. She was a local girl from a village a few short miles from Glastonbury and Street. She styled herself as a poet and called me "the green eyed child". She spoke with an affectation of poetic words like "thee" and "thy" and "thine", words which sounded so perfect in her Somerset accent. She loved Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell.

We all wrote poetry. Mine was usually comedic. I wrote "The Kali Yuga Boogie" which went like this":

"I'm a door-to-door High Lama,
selling instant pleasant karma,
and I'll also sell you dharma,
'cause I'm such a roguish charmer".

I also wrote (to the tune of William Blake's "Jerusalem")
"And does Groucho Marx still Rumba, at Sadie Schwartz's School of Dance?
And would Chicolini play the harp, if he ever got the chance?
Someone call a plumb-ber, 'cause a leak has just been seen,
in the Kilroy Memorial Wash Room, where the ceiling tiles are green!"

and various attempts at writing science fictionalised glam rock pop songs like the "Probability Blast" and "Plutonium Lung".

I also tried my hand at mystical poetry. I wrote about balancing life in accordance with "the laws of the universe" and the influences of the sun and the moon - and I believed in all that sort of thing. I'd been reading books on mystical religion and magic throughout my teenage

years. One whole series of books I'd been following advised us all to be "As wise as serpents and as harmless as doves" - the authors being apparently just as ignorant as I was about the aggressiveness of doves toward each other. All of our pacifist symbols were derived from the silly story of Noah and the flood, the rainbow, the dove, the olive branch. Sandy introduced me to some of the odd friends she knew in the area, including a filthy tramp-like man of about 40 who claimed to be a Hell's Angel (but rode a bicycle) and went by the name of "Tex". According to Sandy, Tex was a heroine addict and was a drug dealer from his little caravan up the Wells Road. The satanic tattoos on Tex's arms showed that he had sold his soul to the goat creature and, oddly, Tex himself looked a bit like an old goat in threadbare trousers and with about a dozen necklaces of beads and medallions hanging around his neck.

Tex imagined himself in constant magical warfare against a rival magician called Scorpio. People in the area told stories of times when Tex and Scorpio had stood against each other casting spells to test each other's strength. Some of the people telling those stories seemed to believe it was all true. It was easy to see how thin was the veneer of civilisation on the hippy scene around Glastonbury and how easily they became medieval or even stone age peasants terrifying each other with tall tales of witchcraft. Just a little more pressure to warp the fabric of reality a little further and it would split, tear open, and someone could fall through the gaping hole into the muck and filth and blood and guts of life in the feudal world of Celts and Saxons and Romans.

Sandy knew Cath, a middle-aged woman who lived on Windmill Hill and was a scandal in the area for having once run away with a hippy man who called himself Jesus. He had a group of disciples and told Cath that she was his spiritual mother Mary. Cath stepped into that role easily because she sometimes saw visions and believed that these glimpses of another kind of reality had meaning.

Baggins introduced me to his friend Geoff Gilbertson.

Geoff eventually became known in the Glastonbury area as a bit of an expert on the occult and ancient legends several years later when he co-authored with Anthony Roberts a book called "The Dark Gods".

However, Geoff himself was possessed of a much lighter personality than his book would suggest. He wanted to be a comedian but his ideas on comedy were a bit retro-Cambridge footlights. He thought it would be funny to do "stereo Malcolm Muggeridges" (two people simultaneously pretending to be 1960s TV presenter Malcolm Muggeridge) or "stereo Harold Wilsons". These were terrible ideas and I tried to explain that to him. People in 1973 would not understand his old fuddy-duddy references. He replied that Harold Wilson was still Prime Minister and Malcolm Muggeridge was often on television. I had to take Geoff's word for both of these statements. As I'd just turned 20 and had been sleeping out on hillsides around Glastonbury for a while (and mentally living in a science fiction novel of the future) the identity of the current Prime Minister or the names of people who were often on television seemed to me to be extremely obscure. Like many people in those days I was deliberately getting "out of touch with the modern world". A fact which the punks, a few years later, would use as a perfectly reasonable criticism.

Geoff thought it was hilarious to walk around on top of Glastonbury Tor saying the words “trip trip vibe, trip, trip, vibe” over and over. And Geoff wasn’t the only one who thought that hippyspeak was funny. We all continually took the mickey out of expressions like “far out” and “cool it” and the tendency which some hippies had of calling men “cats” and women “chicks”. Sandy collapsed in hilarity when she heard one black guy being referred to as a “spade cat”.

Geoff was in a band which wanted to call itself “Shadowfax” but, upon hearing that there already was a band of that name, Geoff wanted to combine his idea with our “Bok” to make “Shadowbok” or possibly “Shadowbox”. I wasn’t very happy about a new person coming into the thing and changing it into something else.

Geoff claimed to be the same age as me and Baggins (I was 20 by then and Baggins a year younger) but Geoff’s receding hairline and old fashioned sense of humour made me think that he was at least ten years older than either of us.

In fact Geoff was 23 in that year. I wouldn’t believe it at the time. I continued to doubt Geoff’s word for years to come, believing that Geoff was “obviously older” and our friendship was always strained as a result. Geoff would sometimes say that he was going to go and get his birth certificate to show to me as evidence and I would say “OK”. But he never did produce that birth certificate.

In spite of personality strains and differences, Geoff was interested in the book Baggins and I were writing. He seemed to take our fantasy creations semi-seriously as they intersected with some of his own ideas about occult conspiracy.

Life in the gigantic open-air surreal artwork that was Glastonbury in 1973 continued. People were getting as thin as the line between reality and fiction. There wasn’t much food to go round. In the squat the menu usually consisted of a “mulligan stew” each day. That is to say, a stew made from whatever people could find. The ingredients invariably included stinging nettles and wild cabbage, combined with past its sell-by date supermarket food salvaged from the skip behind the Nisa in the High Street. We also had “ha’penny cakes” from Jayne’s Bakery, a baker’s shop in the High Street. In Jayne’s they would put all the cakes from yesterday into a glass cabinet on the counter and sell them for two a penny. I had begun to do an act in a pub, the Lamb Inn. Wearing my vintage tailcoat and orange flowery bow-tie I mimed to a record on the juke box, playing the monster characters in “The Monster Mash” by Bobby “Boris” Pickett and Crypt Kickers and people would buy me drinks and food for entertaining them.

My weird performance art gained some local notoriety and local girls who wouldn’t normally want anyone to think they were interested in “dirty hippies” tried to flirt with me as if I had become a bit of a celebrity. I just walked away from them, disinterested. Baggins got angry and envious about this saying, “Why are you walking away, Wiz? You could’ve had those girls! They were making eyes at you!” Nevertheless, having convinced myself that I was in love with Sandy, I wasn’t interested.

The funfair came to Tor Fair Field. Because of the Monster Mash act I had been doing in the pub I was offered a job on the ghost train.

I was interested but the fun fair people backed down on the offer almost immediately and instead offered me a few quid to take a spanner and tighten up the bolts on the supporting structure of the stand where they had the dodgem cars. I accepted, did the work and, at the end of it, was only paid 50p instead of the promised "few quid". When I complained that 50p was much less than he had been promised the dodgem car man snatched back the 50p piece and I got nothing.

Then, in August, came the Windsor Festival.

Sandy and I went up to my mum's house in Morden and I was able to pick up some fresh clothes. Then we travelled south westwards again to Windsor to meet up with some other friends, Jools and Dave, for the Festival. I was dressed up to the nines in a gangster black shirt, white satin tie, navy blue corduroy frock coat, blue jeans, baseball boots and a hippy headband.

The festival was a very do-it-yourself sort of event where hundreds of hippies and rockers gathered and pitched tents, met up with friends, took drugs, amused each other and cooked food on open camp fires.

Sandy began snogging and giggling with Jools in a tent and I decided I'd had enough of all that. She'd done it so many times and it really depressed me. She would act like she was with me and we were a couple and then, suddenly without warning, she was snogging somebody else. I decided that there was no reason for me to hang around so I picked up my things and went off on my own, wandering around the festival.

I danced a bit when Hawkwind were playing, waving my hands around in the "Horns of Asmodeus" form from Doctor Strange comics, pretending to be an android - "adjust me, adjust me, adjust me....."

Then I sat down with some people who invited me to have food with them (a strange mixture of brown rice, eggs and baked beans cooked together in a sooty pot over a log fire), watched as some other people were arrested for smoking cannabis and watched again as the police van which took them away was rocked violently back and forth by about ten or eleven long haired freaks taking up positions on either side of the van. The police officers within looking bewildered at the realisation that Royal Windsor was, apparently, in a state of insurrection. The lateral rocking of the van ceased when one of the freaks suddenly realised, and informed the others, that the arrested people inside the van were bearing the brunt of the violent motion.

I stood nearby making a few pretend wizardly magick passes with my hands in the "Horns of Asmodeus" form and wandered away.

Everything felt empty and yet hopeful at the same time. The book I was writing with Baggins no longer made any sense. It was rubbish, but the realisation that it was rubbish meant I could start writing something better. My romance with Sandy was over too. I was seriously, seriously, yes really genuinely ser-i-ous-ly considering becoming a priest or a monk or a Hare Krishna devotee.

I had begun 1973 as a teenager who didn't smoke, drink alcohol or take any drugs. By the end of the year I was a tobacco smoker and had tried cannabis and LSD (and wasn't impressed by either of them). I knew by then that drugs offered nothing of any particular interest and that all the hyperbole around them was just the Alternative Society's equivalent of Madison Avenue advertising spiel.

It was all stories.

Humans are, and always have been, storytelling creatures.

Birds fly.

Fish swim.

Humans tell stories.

It's what we do.

Storytelling is one of the two defining characteristics of the human species. The other one is our extreme individualistic personality.

All of our theories of how the world works are, in fact, deconstructible narratives which borrow elements of some earlier mythos to build the newer version.

Holy Grails and Maltese Falcons pass in the forms of sign and signifier from story to story and even the Big Bang Theory can be easily deconstructed as an example of the human mind's fumbling attempts to make sense of a complexity which remains forever beyond and beyond and beyond.

Honestly, the idea that everything in the universe was once contained in a point of no space and no time makes about as much sense as the gods coming down from the mountain top and making humans out of mud.

The signifying object is passed from myth to myth in a relay race of instinctive behaviour patterns called archetypes and the heart divines some sense of meaning once again while the head scrutinises the entrails of logical reasoning and decides when to make intuitive leaps into adventure.